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ABSTRACT

The Integrated Occupational Program (IOP) is a new program of studies that is being developed and implemented by Alberta Education (Canada) to meet the needs of students who are identified as being at risk and unable to cope with the regular program. A major feature of the program is its emphasis on first developing students' self-esteem and then, the knowledge, skills and positive attitudes (generic skills) necessary for successful entry into the workplace and/or post-secondary education and training institutions. This paper provides a description of at-risk students and identifies components of effective and non-effective programs. An overview of the IOP reveals two major components: core academic courses and practical arts/occupational courses. School-community partnerships are an important feature of the IOP. These partnerships provide an enhanced environment for instruction and learning, and allow for the development of more inclusive and real life oriented curricula. The benefits of the IOP program are described, and the success of the program is discussed. Students earn a certificate of achievement and a graduate achievement profile upon successful completion of the program. By taking additional high school courses, students may also gain a general high school diploma. (LLL)

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THE INTEGRATED OCCUPATIONAL PROGRAM
BUILDING BRIDGES FOR AT RISK STUDENTS

A Paper Presented at

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by

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The Integrated Occupational Program

Building Bridges for At Risk Students

Alberta Education has a clear goal of helping students be the best they can be and a mandate to provide the best possible education for all Alberta students. Consequently, there is serious concern when any student leaves school before attaining a high school diploma or certificate of achievement, or without the necessary prerequisites to obtain and retain meaningful employment and to pursue further education or training

Speaking to the Alberta School Trustees' Association on November 6, 1990, Minister of Education, Hon. Jim Dinning, proposed a challenging goal - to decrease the drop-out rate in Alberta schools by 10 percent this year (1991-92). In addition, he states:

> ... in the longer term, no student will leave school before he or she is ready - ready to work, ready to continue their studies, ready to make a positive contribution to society. Programs will be designed for students and schools will be a place where students want to be.

Why are we concerned about at risk students? From a personal perspective, such students' entry into the mainstream of society as confident, productive, independent citizens is often delayed, and for some, permanently jeopardized. From a societal perspective, the issue is a major concern. Our rapidly changing society demands increasingly higher levels of education, building the foundation for the lifelong learning required to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. From both a moral and economic perspective, we must make every effort to maximize young people's growth and development and to assist them to become productive members of society.

Department of Education, school systems, and schools must take a leading role in resolving this problem. However, there are other players that also have a key role. These players include other provincial government departments; community agencies; the federal government; and the family, peers, to name a few.

The Integrated Occupational Program (IOP) is a new program of studies that is being developed and implemented by Alberta Education to meet the needs of students who are identified as being at risk and unable to cope with the regular program. A major feature of the program is its emphasis on first developing students' self-esteem and then, the knowledge, skills and positive attitudes (generic skills) necessary for successful entry into the workplace and/or post-secondary education/training institutions.

> ...Adolescents with learning difficulties usually appear to be much more deficient than they really are... these adolescents inevitably have a higher level of basic competence than they customarily demonstrate and, certainly, a higher level than will be revealed by a rigid timed, norm referenced, standardized achievement test (Weber, 1982: 48)

This paper provides a brief description of at risk students, effective programs designed to meet their needs, and concludes with an overview of the Integrated Occupational Program.

AT RISK STUDENTS

In recent years, the term "at risk" has become a familiar descriptor at all levels of education, particularly at the grade school level. Students described as being "at risk" are at risk of school failure, and at risk of becoming dropouts. In some cases, these students have a history of school failure and dropping in and out of school.

> ...schools are failing to educate an alarming number of students. In many large urban districts, for example, more than half of the students drop out before completing high school. And although some later finish their schooling, many of these individuals fail to acquire the minimum levels of competence in basic academic skills that most jobs require. Not surprisingly, awareness of these problems is widespread, and professional educators and business and political leaders search diligently for solutions. (McPartland and Slavin, 1990: 1)

There is an increasing body of literature that focuses attention on at risk students. The common themes in the literature relate to identifying students who may be at risk and educational programs

that may best meet their needs. The Phi Delta Kappa study (1989) began with the assumption that "children are at risk if they fail either in school or in life". (Fryme and Gansneeder, 1989: 142)

Research on identifying at risk students shows that many come from single-parent homes and from families with low socio-economic status (Green, 1987). Other findings (Cohen, 1987) suggest that the characteristics of these students may include:

- Two or more years behind the grade level of their peers, in reading, and mathematic skills.
- Chronic attendance and truancy problems.
- Delinquent behavior.
- Victims of personal and/or family alcohol or drug abuse.
- Victims of family trauma, such as death, divorce, violence, separation and/or unemployment.
- Victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.
- Victims of ethnic, economic or cultural disadvantage.

High School dropouts do not deny the value of getting the best education possible. They do however, according to some Canadian research (Krahn et al., 1985; Radwanski, 1987) feel that while education is of value, schooling is of little value. In particular, many dropouts feel that schools failed to properly prepare them for the workplace.

A longitudinal study reported in 1985 found that after leaving school dropouts

> ....moved into a marginal labour market characterized by frequent bouts of unemployment, low paying, low status jobs, low job security and few intrinsic job rewards. In short, success in the labour market had eluded most of these young people. (Krahn et al. 1985: 2)

A conference sponsored by the Agency for Instructional Technology (June, 1987) focused on at risk students. The executive summary of the conference highlighted the following points:

- Inadequate or marginal teaching contributes to putting students at risk.
- Working at a regular job, in addition to attending school, places some students at risk.
- Substantial numbers of urban students are characterized by not just one risk factor but by several factors acting together.

In a related context, a 1988 study by Goldfarb Consultants on behalf of the Ontario Ministry of Education concluded that the drop-out problem is multi-dimensional. The study found that drop-outs' complaints about the school system were justified and their reasons for leaving school valid. The research indicated the following:

> Many drop-outs spend years in school feeling bored. Many also spend years in school feeling neglected and/or misunderstood. Those who teach dropouts do not describe them in the same fashion as those who live with them or those who work with them. Drop-outs are the silent third in the system. Although, many might make a lot of noise while they are in class, their leaving generally causes hardly a ripple. They slip from school into a narrowly circumscribed work world, an articulate, sensitive and adequately intelligent group of young people wearing an academic mark of Cain (Karp, 1988: 5)

Other research indicates that at risk students have low self-esteem, have difficulty with gross and/or fine motor skills, and have difficulty relating to peers and adults.

However, a note of caution is necessary before we label a student as being at risk simply because one or more of these characteristics seem to fit. Most researchers acknowledge that we must avoid the "common error of confusing association with causation" (Green, 1987). Significant numbers of students who have one or more of the characteristics noted achieve as well if not better than students who do not display any of these characteristics.

EFFECTIVE and NON-EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Almost without exception, researchers suggest that effective educational programs for at risk students are ones that:

- maximize experiential learning opportunities;
- concentrate on the development of basic knowledge, attitudes and skills in meaningful contexts;
- address the students' needs to be successful and feel successful;
- focus on the learning of communication, human relations, and organizational skills in the applied contexts rather than as theories;
- recognize the community as an integral partner in the education and learning process; and
- enable students to recognize that there is dignity in doing a job well and a future in learning how to do the job better.

Hughes and Latto (1987) confirmed previous findings regarding the importance of generic or transferable skill development as a major focus of effective programs. When employers were asked to identify what they believed to be the most useful skills and attitudes that should be emphasized in high schools, they listed, in order of priority:

1. Communication skills.
2. Language skills.
3. Reasoning and problem solving skills.
4. The ability to develop and maintain positive interpersonal relationships.
5. Positive attitudes to self, work, and to further learning.

These same employers indicated that the least useful programs to be emphasized in high schools were those that focused on occupation-specific job skills.

This message is not new. Brown (1976) in a survey of business and industry in the United States found that employers rejected job applicants for the following reasons (the list is rank ordered):

1 Little interest in work.

2. Applicant has history of job hopping.

3. Inability to communicate during job interview.

4. Health record.

5. Immaturity (other than chronological age).

6. Personal appearance.

7. Manners and mannerisms.

8. Personality.

9. Lack of job-related skills.

10. Poorly completed application forms.

Similarly they indicated that the causes for terminating employment (rank ordered) include:

1. Absenteeism

2. Lack of interest in job

3. Continuously makes costly mistakes.

4. Does not follow instructions

5. Shows an unwillingness to learn.

Suggested areas for improvement in students abilities (rank ordered) include:

1. Concern for productivity.

2. Pride in quality of work.

3. Task commitment.

4. Dependability

5. Work habits

6. Attitudes.

7. Ability to write and speak effectively.

8. Ability to follow instructions.

9. Ability to read and apply printed matter on the job.

10, Ambition/motivation/desire to get ahead.

Similar deficiencies in workplace readiness are noted across Canada and the U.S. (Barton and Kirsch, 1990; O'Connor, 1985).

Have the needs of business and industry changed that much in recent years? Have educators, counsellors, trainers been listening attentively to what employers and others have been saying about education/training/counselling programs? These and other related questions need to be responded to by every person engaged in the vocational counselling and education/training professions.

The Integrated Occupational Program is one of Alberta Education's responses.

THE INTEGRATED OCCCUPATIONAL PROGRAM

The Integrated Occupational Program is a five year program that begins in Grade 8 and continues through the twelfth year of schooling. The program is being developed for students who continue to experience difficulty in learning. The focus of the academic courses is on development of the skills necessary for everyday living at home, in the community and on the job. While basic skill development in the academic courses is directed to improving students' knowledge, attitudes and skills in communication, computation and social relationships, the occupational courses provide opportunities for students to apply these skills.

The IOP courses, and in particular the practical arts and occupational courses, each have a community partnership component, to provide enrichment and meaningfulness to the curriculum. As students see the relevance of their learning, they tend to become more interested in learning and in acquiring needed skills. Community partnerships

also provide opportunities to enhance students' social skills and self-esteem while providing occupational preparation for entry into the world of work.

PURPOSE OF THE INTEGRATED OCCUPATIONAL PROGRAM

The Integrated Occupational Program is designed to enable students to:

- become responsible members of society.
- develop entry-level vocational abilities
- recognize the need for lifelong learning.

TARGET POPULATION

The number of students who experience learning difficulty with the regular school program varies across the different school jurisdictions in the province. The following criteria have been established which, **taken together**, determine student eligibility for the Integrated Occupational Program:

1. Age and/or Years spent in the Program - Students must be 12 years, 6 months of age or older as of September 30. Many students will be older since they may have experienced one or more years of failure in the regular program.

2. Achievement - Candidates for the Integrated Occupational Program often demonstrate a significant lag in one or more of their academic courses (Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies) and thus lack the prerequisite skills for successful entry into high school.

3. Related Factors - While Integrated Occupational Program students typically fall within the intelligence band of 75-95, IQ should not be the sole factor for determining eligibility. Rather, it is one factor which should be considered together with such related factors as behavior, motivation, emotional makeup, work habits, attendance and persistence.

Students not among the IOP target population are:

- those whose deficiencies require special needs programs - Educable Mentally Handicapped, Trainable Mentally Handicapped
- those whose needs for remediation can be addressed through the elective components of regular courses or through remedial classes
- those whose sole criteria for entry is excessively disruptive behavior. These students should be directed to more suitable special needs programs.

COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM

There are two major components of the IO Program:

- Core (academic) courses. These courses include, English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies.
- Practical Arts (Grade 8 and 9); Occupational courses (10 - 12). At the junior high school level, the Practical Arts consists of courses in Business Education, Personal and Public Services and Technncial-Occupational. In Grades 10 - 12, students may select from a group of twenty courses arranged in eight occupational clusters. The eight clusters and their related courses are shown on the following chart.

Clusters	Courses
Agribusiness	Agricultural Productions Agricultural Mechanics Horticultural Services
Business and Office Operations	Business Services Office Services
Construction and Fabrication	Building Services Construction Services

Creative Arts	Crafts and Arts Technical Arts
Natural Resources	Natural Resource Services
Personal and Public Services	Child and Health Care Services Esthetology Fashion and Fabric Services Hair Care
Tourism and Hospitality	Commercial Food Preparation Food Services Maintenance and Hospitality Services
Transportation	Automotive Services Service Station Services Warehouse Services

SCHOOL - COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

School - community partnerships are an important feature of the IOP. These partnerships ensure that the special needs of Integrated Occupational Program students are addressed in real life learning situations.

The Alberta government's policy Statement *Secondary Education in Alberta* (June 1985) Policy Statement supports the concept of community partnership:

- Policies and guidelines will be developed to facilitate the effective use of educational services outside the school.
- The secondary school system will explore ways of using accomplished members of the community such as scientists, performing artists, and community leaders, more extensively in schools, in both instructional and non-instructional ways, and in support and in association with permanent teaching staffs. For example, useful approaches might include school-community exchange, creative use of staff leave provisions, and other "partnership" ventures.

- Expanded practical experience programs planned, administered and evaluated in consultation with the academic, cultural, recreational, social services, business, industrial and labour-related communities will be required to provide some students with the knowledge and the practical experiences they need for occupational awareness and preparation.

- The secondary school system should develop direct and effective linkages with public and private agencies in the community, particularly those that provide services to Alberta youth, to ensure coordinated and complementary assistance to students.

- The responsibility for student's secondary school programs will evolve toward a partnership among students, parents, the secondary school, and the community. Students, parents and teachers will be responsible for planning each student's program.

Schools working with businesses and individual volunteers to prepare students, represent investment that will continue paying dividends; dividends in the form of a more literate society, better prepared employees, and a community that is proud of its schools.

Community partnerships are designed to:

- provide students with hands-on experience to help them to relate their schooling to everyday life and experience in the workplace and the community

- develop students' awareness of essential workplace attributes, and to prepare participants for the attainment of these attributes.

- provide occupational preparation for entry into the world of work

- provide students with an opportunity to develop life skills in the areas of goal setting,, decision making and problem solving

- Promote the development of self-esteem, self-awareness and self-assertion through social interaction at the place of employment and in the community

- encourage participants to continue their education, and to seek further post-secondary education or training appropriate to their career, educational and personal/social aspirations.

The integration of community partnerships in the IOP course helps students to develop a range of abilities much broader that those usually contained within formal curriculum. Through partnerships, students are better able to learn about their community, its culture and its people.

The importance of cultural transmission is addressed by Meijnen (1990). He notes:

> The transmission of culture within school is much wider that what is contained in the formal curriculum. The formal objectives are affected through a hallmarked system of instruction and evaluation procedures. The non-formal objectives go without this system. Yet if pupils fail in this respect, this has consequences for the qualifications by which they are assessed. So pupils are supposed somehow to have these skills as stock-in-trade. (Meijnen, 1990: 8)

Students properly targeted for the IOP do not generally have these skills. Therefore, the inclusion of partnerships as required components of IOP curricula provides not only an enhanced environment for instruction and learning, they allow for the development of more inclusive and real life oriented curricula.

BUILDING BRIDGES

The Integrated Occupational Program provides opportunities for students to participate in practical learning experiences within the school, home and the community. The courses focus first and foremost on the needs of students and seek to build on their strengths rather than on their weaknesses. These programs are designed to help students construct their own bridges as they make the transition from school to the workplace.

Three key concepts about the program emerge from the above:

1. Students need to develop generic skills* that will enable them to make educated decisions concerning the roles they wish to play in the workplace and in the community.

2. Students need to develop work skills that will enable them to gain at least entry-level employment in one or more occupational clusters.

3. The development of both generic skills and work skills can best be achieved through courses of study that integrate:

   (a) the learning of essential knowledge, skills and attitudes across the curriculum; and

   (b) the school and the community as partners in the educational process.

The IOP Occupational courses are designed to enable each student to experience success through learning to develop a positive self-concept; to develop saleable and life skills; and to make the transition from student, to work, to contributing member of society.

The Grades 8 and 9 Practical Arts courses are designed to provide students with an AWARENESS of the eight occupational clusters addressed in the senior high occupational components.

The Grade 10 students EXPLORE potential career opportunities within the eight occupational clusters. Grade 11 students narrow their career focus and will select an ORIENTATION in two or more related occupational courses. Grade 12 enables students to narrow their career focus even further, and to develop skills in PREPARATION for their transition to either the world of work or to another educational/training institution.

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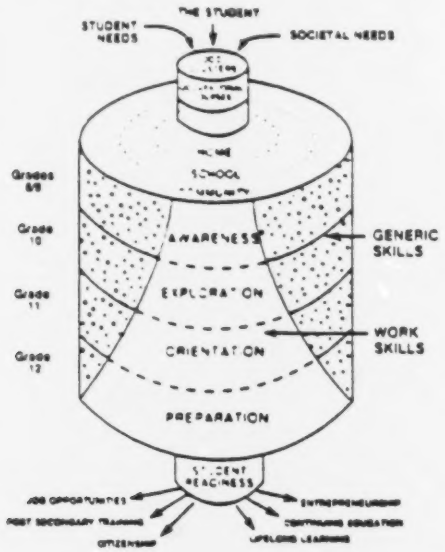
* Generic Skills are those behaviors that are actively used in work performance, are transferable from one job or occupation to another, and which are needed for promotion, continuing education, or lifelong learning. (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1979) Examples include: Interpersonal and Job Search Skills, Organizational and Reasoning skills, Communication and Literacy Skills.

Figure one shows the sequence of occupational skill development and the anticipated outcomes for students who complete the program and attain a Certificate of Achievement.



BENEFITS OF IOP

The structure of IOP provides the following benefits:

- All learning in core subjects begin at the concrete level. Instruction in any skill begins with reference to real-life application. This learning is deliberately reinforced and applied in the occupational courses (e.g., "measurement" is taught in mathematics and applied in the occupational courses). It is often this deliberate reinforcement in a practical area that enables students to understand the need for academic knowledge as it applies to job success.

- Junior and senior high core courses (Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies) reflect the content of traditional courses within a functional, life skills and applied occupational context.

- The program is designed to allow flexibility for students to access schooling, education and training. The amount of time for occupational courses increases at the senior high level.

- The program encourages student integration into non-IOP courses where appropriate (Health, Physical Education, and complimentary courses in senior high). Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of alternative strategies to accommodate students' needs.

- Content emphasis in each course is on the abilities essential to becoming responsible members of society.

- The community partnership component ensures that the special needs of the students are addressed in practical, real-life learning situations. Practical learning experiences are provided with the aid of role models, mentors, community endeavors and the business world. Such experiences not only increase students' motivation and achievement and enhance their self-image, they provide opportunities for students to:

  - acquire employability skills while attending school
  - increase career awareness
  - explore occupational choices
  - develop a better understanding of the employer/employee relationship
  - assist in the transition from school to the workplace

- Extensive teacher resources are available at a level of reading and interest suitable for IOP students

- The program offers multiple entry and exit points to accommodate the needs of individual students. As soon as students indicate a readiness for success in one or more subjects in the regular program, such exit is encouraged.

- There is an emphasis on effective teaching and alternative learning strategies and, where appropriate, an "open door" school policy.

- All IOP courses are field validated before implementation to ensure they are appropriate for students.

- Students earn a Certificate of Achievement and a Graduate Achievement Profile upon successful completion of the program.

- By taking additional high school courses, students may also gain a General High School Diploma.

SUCCESS TO DATE

> Early pioneers in work with difficult youth strongly challenged the indifference and pessimism of their times. They were incurable optimists who could always find cause for hope in the face of the most difficult problems....pessimism is common in contemporary approaches to difficult youth (Brendettro, et al.., 1990: 2)

The IOP is a new program. To date, Grades 8, 9 and 10 courses are available,. Grades 11 and 12 will be implemented in September 1991 and 1992 respectively.

Key stakeholders, students, parents, teachers and community partners have reviewed the program most favourably. Students' attendance and performance has improved. Parents note positive changes in their son's and daughter's attitudes. Teachers appreciate the support provided by the new resources and the opportunity to use "off the wall" teaching/learning strategies. Community partners welcome the opportunity to be part of a bold, new educational enterprise and appreciate the potential benefits to themselves and to their respective businesses/industries.

The key, however, is the teacher. As in all effective educational programs, the teacher brings the curriculum to life and in so doing inspires new life and the desire for new learning into students.

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